GREENS TO GREENBACKS: THE ECONOMIC BENEFITS OF LOCAL FOOD
AN AGRICULTURAL ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT TOOLKIT

DECEMBER 2013
Don’t think of kale as just green leaves from an organic farm. Think of it as green dollars in the local economy. Think of local food production not as a threat to commodity farmers, but as an opportunity for them. Think of ways to locally process that food – adding value to it while adding jobs to the community.

Local food is much more than community gardens and farmers markets. Done right, a local-food system is about trucks and slaughterhouses, jobs and businesses. A local or regional food system can also – by the way – preserve farmland and make nutritious food more readily available to people who need it.
In 2010, the Mid-Ohio Regional Planning Commission (MORPC) released the Central Ohio Local Food Assessment and Plan, which identified the need for, benefits of, and challenges facing a local-food system. Since then, MORPC has helped organize local food councils by establishing a regional food council serving 12 Central Ohio counties. In 2012, MORPC received a grant from the Ohio Environmental Education Fund to conduct workshops promoting agriculture and local food as economic development. This guide is intended to expand on those workshops and take the lessons to more communities.

From an environmental standpoint, one goal of a local-food system is to preserve farmland, and to promote rural planning in a way that strengthens the agricultural economy. Farmers know the best way to preserve farmland is to make sure farming is profitable.

From an economic and social standpoint, local food can make agriculture more viable; keep food dollars in our communities; create processing and distribution jobs; and make fresh, local, nutritious food more readily available to people of all income levels. The approach is about food processing and distribution, not just raising livestock or growing vegetables.

There are many stereotypes and misperceptions about local food: that it's grown by old hippies with small organic gardens and sold to Birkenstock-wearing farmers-market fanatics; that it's an elitist effort to get expensive heirloom vegetables into high-end restaurants, to be devoured by “foodies;” that it's an attempt to discredit conventional commodity agriculture.

The goal of this toolkit is to show policymakers, business and civic leaders, and local food advocates that a local food system can do many things:

- Identify ways for commodity farmers to diversify and explore new opportunities on part of their land
- Create local food “hubs” that can serve meat and vegetable producers the way grain elevators serve commodity growers
- Encourage expansion or creation of food processing and distribution businesses that create jobs, add value, keep food dollars in the local economy, and extend the shelf life of local food
- Help grocery chains, hospitals, schools, and other businesses and institutions nurture supply chains that procure sufficient quantities of locally produced food throughout the year
- Ensure that nutritious, fresh, local food is affordably available even to people of limited means
- Ensure that farming is profitable enough for good agricultural land to grow food rather than houses
HELPFUL HINTS

There is no right or wrong way to form a food council or initiate a local-food plan. But the workshops looked at experiences in many communities and promoted the following guidelines:

ROUNDTABLE DISCUSSIONS FOSTER COOPERATION
The roundtable format encourages informality and ensures everyone feels comfortable participating – creating an opportunity for people around the table to talk directly with each other and determine what’s needed. For example, a chef may tell a farmer that he needs a certain volume each week, over an extended period, and that he’d prefer to deal with a single supplier. A farmer may tell a distributor he would be willing to grow a particular crop if there were an easily accessible aggregation point, or hub, where he and other producers could take it. A school or hospital food service director may ask a distributor to find more local sources for products. A farmer may tell a health official or county commissioner that he needs guidance on clearing certain regulatory hurdles.

REACH OUT TO ALL FARMERS
Don’t limit your efforts to people and organizations already committed to local food. Include commodity farmers and mainstream agriculture organizations. Local-food advocates should understand that a local, regional, or statewide food system will need to include many more farmers in order to reach all Ohioans; and mainstream farmers need to hear the message that a regional food system will create new marketing opportunities and enable them to diversify their farm businesses. These two segments of agriculture too often mistrust each other. But agriculture should be unified toward the twin goals of profitable farming and good food for the people.

DON’T SHY AWAY FROM CONFLICT OR SKEPTICISM
In many instances, participants may be skeptical or ask tough questions. Airing these concerns is painful, but beneficial. Workshop participants cited the need for a “wet blanket” in local food initiatives in order to address those tough questions before creating a plan or establishing a council.

DIRECT MARKETING IS NOT ENOUGH
Farmers markets and community gardens can feed only so many people. Processed food is not the opposite of local food. In fact, it is essential to increasing the availability of local food. All cheese is processed food. The most hyper-local of jams and jellies are processed food. Expanding small farms, aggregating product from many local farms, extending the growing season through hoop houses, extending the availability of local foods through processing, developing an efficient distribution system – all these are needed to make local food more accessible.

COMMUNICATE
The roundtable format encourages informality and ensures everyone feels comfortable participating. Include commodity farmers and mainstream agriculture organizations and encourage participants to discuss concerns openly and freely.
**BUILD ON CURRENT STRENGTHS**

Many communities take for granted the existence of food-processing businesses that provide marketing opportunities for farmers and business pathways for entrepreneurs. Tip Top Canning in Tipp City, Kettle Creations in Lima, Wyandot Snacks in Marion, and Summer Garden Food Manufacturing in Youngstown are a few examples of companies that process foods grown locally, sometimes under their own brands and sometimes by contract for private labels. Most also can serve existing companies that are expanding, or serve as an incubator for new companies and products.

**CULTIVATE HOSPITALS AND COLLEGES**

Many communities express interest in getting local food into farm-to-school programs as a way to help farmers and expose students to fresh and nutritious meals. But the practice is not widespread. There also are some good models among colleges and universities that serve locally raised food. Hospitals, too: The Cleveland Clinic has worked through an Ohio-based food-service company; hospitals in Columbus, Lancaster, and Newark have worked with local distributors and farmers. Such institutions are important partners in developing local food systems because they are major purchasers, and their commitment to local food sends a strong message to farmers and distributors that local food can be a solid market and not a passing fad.

**RECOVER FOOD WASTE**

An estimated 40 percent of U.S. food is wasted, even as hunger and poverty are major problems. The waste includes excess vegetables that farmers were unable to sell, as well as unsold produce in restaurants, grocery stores, and distribution warehouses. Farmers often plow the excess into the soil, but wholesalers and retailers traditionally have treated it as waste and paid to have it hauled to landfills. Increasingly, private firms and public agencies are composting the waste, generating a useful product for farmers and gardeners. But much of the excess produce is still perfectly edible. Establishing local canneries or other processors can turn excess produce into shelf-stable products that eliminate waste, generate revenue, and feed the hungry.

**PREPARE THE NEXT GENERATION**

The Ohio State University boasts that over 90 percent of its Agriculture graduates find jobs or go on to seek advanced degrees. However, only 2 percent of those go into farming, even though the average age of Ohio farmers is 57. Where will the next generation of food farmers come from? Or the next generation of meat cutters? Who will be the farm laborers at planting and harvest time? High school agriculture programs are still needed. Vocational and technical schools, community colleges, universities, and culinary programs need to be part of the discussion.
WHY SHOULD WE HAVE A LOCAL-FOOD SYSTEM?
Most of the $40 billion or so that Ohioans spend on food each year goes out of state. By growing and processing more of that food locally and regionally, we can keep billions more dollars circulating in Ohio’s economy. But we can’t make the change overnight. If every farmer in Ohio decided next year to grow just for local markets, and every consumer in Ohio vowed to buy local, we wouldn’t be able to make the connections. There is a serious lack of local-food processing capacity – particularly meat processing – and a lack of regional-oriented distribution channels in Ohio.

IS LOCAL FOOD A BETTER OPTION BECAUSE OF A SMALLER CARBON FOOTPRINT?
Not necessarily. The oft-cited figure that food travels an average of 1,500 miles to get to our plate comes from a 2001 study that focused on Chicago and on certain foods. Still, much of our food travels long distances in a national processing and distribution system. But that system is cost-effective and relies of the efficiencies of large volumes. A local farmers market, with 20 farmers bringing relatively small amounts of food in separate small trucks to a single location is not really efficient, but the food is probably tastier and more nutritious. The challenge, then, is to develop a localized system that moves good local food around as efficiently as the national firms move their food.

HOW DO WE GET STARTED?
Identify a champion – someone who will take the lead in bringing the people and process together. Then create a group to guide a local-food assessment/plan, or form a food council to promote local food.

WHO SHOULD BE ON THE PANEL?
It can be a challenge to find the right interests and the right number of participants, but meetings of more than 16 or 18 people can sometimes be unwieldy. Some professions and points of view should be on any council. But every community has different priorities and particular interests it might want to add. Here is a list of interests to consider:

- Farmers (both local-food producers and commodity farmers)
- Public health department
- Food retailers/co-ops
- Institutional buyers (school districts, colleges, hospitals, etc.)
- Non-profit or faith-based advocacy groups
- Food processing distribution companies/organizations
- Economic development agency/department
- Local (city, township, county) government
- Food banks
- Wet blanket
WHAT DO YOU MEAN BY “WET BLANKET?”
Often, the most important person at the table is the one asking the toughest questions. It may be a skeptic who likes the idea of a local-food council or plan but isn’t convinced it is feasible or popular. It may be a farmer or business leader who has a lot of questions about how it will work for him or her. Either way, the “wet blanket” will force the group to address challenges. The result will be a more-solid plan. In one county, the food-service director of a local hospital group was always raising questions. But he also put his money where his mouth was. By the end of the planning process, his institution had local sources for all of the apples and ground beef it served.

SHOULD IT BE A “FOOD POLICY COUNCIL” OR A “LOCAL FOOD COUNCIL?”
It’s up to you what you call the council. MORPC has recommended that food councils steer clear of the “policy” term because some people may be uncomfortable with it and because an effective council will do much more than shape public policy.

IS A FOOD COUNCIL A PUBLIC EFFORT OR A PRIVATE EFFORT?
A food plan and food council should be a public-private partnership. A forward-looking food plan will fall short if there is no effort to cultivate the business of food production, processing, and distribution. Likewise, a solid business plan is not so solid if local policies stand in the way. Whether the council is an arm of a local government is another matter left up to participants. MORPC recommends that councils include local government representation but maintain an independent status.

WHAT IF THERE ARE COMPETING INTERESTS AT THE TABLE?
Competing interests must be brought together. Health and business may be in conflict at times, for example. Public health officials should be at the table for at least two reasons. First, they are advisors on health and nutrition, and are knowledgeable about the need to ensure nutritious food is accessible to struggling urban or rural families. Second, they are advisors on food safety. But interpretation of state standards varies from county to county, or between city and county health departments. Health officials monitor the safety of locally produced and processed foods, but business and economic-development advocates should be at the table with them. If the safety of a product or process is in question, the business and health leaders should collaborate on how to fix the process. There are two goals: creating profitable products and businesses, and ensuring safe products. If there is a conflict, find a way to meet both needs through “creative friction.”

DO WE NEED A COMMUNITY PLAN OR COUNCIL IF WE JUST WANT TO FOCUS ON SENIOR CITIZENS AND OTHER PEOPLE IN NEED?
Yes, you need a comprehensive local food plan. It is highly impractical, if not impossible, to design a separate food system for targeted populations. Instead, communities need a regional system that is designed to ensure market access to small farms as well as large ones, and to ensure broad access to affordable, nutritious, local food for everyone, especially those of modest means.
WHAT ARE SOME GOALS TO SET FOR A FOOD COUNCIL OR A FOOD PLAN?

The reasons for building a local food system are many – ranging from the soil to the skillet. Here are a few of them:

- Protect farmland. Farmers know that the best way to preserve farmland is to make sure farming is profitable. Diversifying into local produce, meat, or other food is one way for farmers to do that.
- Ensure that fresh, healthful food is easily available to those in need.
- Create jobs. One of the biggest bottlenecks in getting Ohio-raised food to Ohio consumers is the lack of sufficient processing and distribution “infrastructure.” Building up the capacity of those industries to meet the needs of farmers and consumers will create jobs.
- Keep food dollars in the local economy. Ohioans spend over $40 billion a year on food. The best estimates are that, at most, 10 percent of that is locally produced and processed. That means Ohioans export 36 billion food dollars out of state every year. Try to keep as many of those dollars as possible in Ohio.
- Create marketing options and opportunities for farmers. Corn growers don’t sell directly to Kellogg’s for corn flakes. They often sell through a local grain elevator. A network of local-food hubs could be the equivalent of a grain elevator for locally raised fruit, vegetables, meat, poultry, and dairy products.

WHAT IF MY COMMUNITY CAN’T AFFORD A CONSULTANT TO DO A LOCAL-FOOD PLAN?

There are many options. Often, local foundations or government agencies are interested in food and nutrition issues, particularly for underserved populations, and may award grants for a plan or a consultant. Fairfield County used a small grant from The Ohio State University. The county’s regional planning agency, with support from the Soil & Water Conservation District, put together a steering committee, then worked with an OSU class in City and Regional Planning. The committee identified priorities and parameters for the plan, but the students, as part of a class project, actually wrote it. Other local resources – Chambers of Commerce, Farm Bureau organizations, and others – may spearhead the effort. In Union County, the Chamber has established an Agriculture Association. The Chamber adopted an agriculture economic-development strategy (including, but not limited to, local foods) and established a local food council, called Eat Local Union County. An effort in the early stages in Richland County was initiated by the Ohio Farm Bureau Federation’s organization director for the area.
FOOD SYSTEM
A network of farms, food hubs, processors, distributors, and buyers. Ideally, it will include investors, lenders, and economic policymakers, but also composting, recycling, and fuel-efficient delivery vehicles. A food hub is very important but does not constitute a food system; it is just one component of a system. Central Ohio is planning for a variety of food hubs, each with a specialty, but all linked in a network of private businesses, non-profits, cooperatives, and institutions.

FOOD HUB
A key link in a local-food supply chain. A facility, or facilities, allowing aggregation of products from small and large farms and providing a distribution point for them. Between aggregation and distribution, the hub may provide cooling, storage, washing, sorting, and packing services. It may also offer processing (canning, freezing, pouching, dehydrating) facilities and a retail store or co-op. Other services that could be offered include local food brokering and marketing; training in food production, safety, and practices; or a local-food think-tank or council. Some emerging examples in Ohio include:

- ACENet – a business incubator and center of entrepreneurship in Athens, serving several Appalachian counties
- Cleveland Crops – a new processing facility adjacent to an urban farm and greenhouse, and linked to other Cleveland producers
- Lake to River Co-op – an emerging processing incubator in a depressed Youngstown neighborhood, linked with farms and entrepreneurs in Mahoning, Trumbull, and Columbiana counties
- Weinland Park – proposed food processing and community center in a depressed urban community in Columbus

PROCESSING
Any processes that add value or add to the usable life of a fresh, local food product. It can be as simple as washing, sorting, and packing vegetables, but also includes more-intensive processes such as canning, pouching, freezing, or dehydrating the produce. It includes the slaughter and butchering of animals, the washing and packaging of eggs, and the processing of raw milk into cheese, butter, yogurt, ice cream, and other products. Some people misconstrue local and natural foods only as fresh, whole products, and view “processing” as diminishing those goods. But all cheeses are processed food. A family that picks many quarts of strawberries in June, then freezes some and makes jam out of some, is processing food.

GLOSSARY

WEINLAND PARK FOOD DISTRICT
The Food District, a proposed complex in the Weinland Park neighborhood of Columbus, was planned with an $864,000 grant MORPC received from the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development. It will include a food-processing plant, a cash & carry wholesale market, a food co-op and café, event space, offices, and comprehensive business and product-development services for entrepreneurs. It will create 75 permanent jobs and include a job-training and -placement program.

The “co-packer” processing facility will serve companies that are expanding a product line or rolling out a new shelf-stable product. Those companies will have local sources for much of their raw product and will pay a fee for use of the Food District’s facilities and workers in the process.

While this food hub will offer a much-needed variety of services, it is just one hub in a regional vision for a network of hubs. The Food District will concentrate on “flexible pouching” of food products. Other Central Ohio communities are considering hubs that would focus on canning, flash-freezing, or meat processing. The envisioned network would include business links among the hubs and collaboration on developing a cost-efficient distribution system. Collectively, the ventures would provide new markets to farmers, who would then have an incentive to increase production of food for local consumption.
MORPC’s Central Ohio Local Food Assessment and Plan in 2010 inspired Fairfield County in 2011 to produce Fairfield Growing: An Agricultural Economic Development Plan. Since then, Fairfield, Union, Licking, and Franklin counties have created local food councils. (Knox County has had a council for over 10 years.) Pickaway, Delaware, and Marion have taken steps toward creating local food councils or plans. MORPC established a Central Ohio Regional Food Council in 2012 to bring local-council representatives together and to find ways to carry out the 2010 plan.

The workshops through the Ohio Environmental Education Fund were an attempt to share the knowledge gained in Central Ohio in recent years, and to learn about experiences elsewhere in the state. The workshops evolved over the course of 2013 as the presentation was refined; questions raised at one workshop were incorporated into the next. For example, a dairy farmer in the first workshop suggested that conventional farmers and commodity growers should be invited – demonstrating that local food should not be about big vs. small farms, and should not pit one type of agriculture against another.

Small groups were invited to build links among participants around food economies that may previously not have existed. Participants included county commissioners, county health officials, economic development directors, county planners, farmers, OSU Extension agents, city officials, public schools, colleges and universities, hospitals, food distributors and processors, chefs, retailers, non-profit agencies, agricultural lenders, downtown development associations, Farm Bureau representatives, soil and water conservation districts, co-ops, chambers of commerce, and others.

After an initial 30- to 40-minute presentation about the economic benefits of agriculture and local food – participants would have an informed round-table discussion. Typically, the discussion started with questions for the presenter. But soon people were talking across the table about how they might work together on a venture, or who else would be invited into the circle to develop a food plan or create a food council.

The workshops in this series have been well-attended and effective. Several communities have embarked upon plans, established food councils, or organized special local-food events.
RESOURCES:

- Central Ohio Local Food information Hub: http://centralohiolocalfood.org/
- Agroecosystems Management Program of The Ohio State University: http://www.localfoodsystmes.org/
- Real Food Real Local Institute/30-Mile Meal: http://realfoodreallocalinstitute.org/
- Ohio Market Maker: http://oh.marketmaker.uiuc.edu/
- Ohio Local Food Policy Council Network: http://glennschool.osu.edu/food/
- Ohio Department of Agriculture, Specialty Crop Promotion Program: http://www.agri.ohio.gov/divs/specialtycrops/specialtycrops.aspx
COUNCILS

Franklin County Local Food Council: http://franklincountylocalfoodcouncil.org
Fairfield County Local Food Council: https://www.facebook.com/FairfieldGrowing?ref=tn_tnmn
Licking County Local Food Council: https://www.facebook.com/LLocalfoodcouncil?skip_nax_wizard=true
Knox County Local Food Council: http://www.kirklyn.com/hgg/hgindex.htm
Eat Local Union County: https://www.facebook.com/pages/Eat-Local-Union-County/143028762563781
Ohio Fresh Food Corridor (Pickaway County): https://www.facebook.com/OhioFreshFoodsCorridor?fref=ts
Cleveland-Cuyahoga County Food Policy Coalition: http://cccfoodpolicy.org/
Northwest Ohio Food Council: http://www.foodcouncil419.org/
Athens Food Policy Council: http://ohiofoodshed.ning.com/group/athensfoodpolicycouncil
Greater Cincinnati Regional Food Policy Council: http://www.greenumbrella.org/member-organizations/organizations-associations/cincinnati-regional-food-policy-council
Montgomery County Food Policy Coalition: https://www.facebook.com/pages/Montgomery-County-Food-Policy-Coalition/140905959320354?ref=stream
Summit County Food Policy Coalition: http://summitpc.wordpress.com/tag/summit-food-policy-coalition/

PLANS/REPORTS

CENTRAL OHIO LOCAL FOOD ASSESSMENT AND PLAN
FAIRFIELD GROWING: AN AGRICULTURAL ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT PLAN
Executive summary: http://www.co.fairfield.oh.us/rpc/images/FairfieldGrowing_ExSum.pdf
Full plan: http://www.co.fairfield.oh.us/rpc/images/Fairfield_Full_Plan_082411.pdf
THE 25% SHIFT (NORTHEAST OHIO REGIONAL FOOD PLAN)
OHIO’S FOOD SYSTEMS – FARMS AT THE HEART OF IT ALL
FINDING FOOD IN NORTHWEST OHIO
http://crcworks.org/ohnwfood.pdf
UNION COUNTY AGRICULTURAL ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT STRATEGY

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Licking County Local Food Council: https://www.facebook.com/LLocalfoodcouncil?skip_nax_wizard=true
Knox County Local Food Council: http://www.kirklyn.com/hgg/hgindex.htm
Eat Local Union County: https://www.facebook.com/pages/Eat-Local-Union-County/143028762563781
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Montgomery County Food Policy Coalition: https://www.facebook.com/pages/Montgomery-County-Food-Policy-Coalition/140905959320354?ref=stream
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